

Lee: No more Mr. Nice Guy. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode 205.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Lee: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. How far will you go to please your partner? No one likes peering into a schoolyard and seeing a bully. Bullies are mean and manipulative, but they exist. What many people don't know is the secret ingredient that gives bullies power. It's submission. It's very hard to have someone push you around if that is something you won't accept. So how does the schoolyard relate to marriages? Well, many marriages are filled with people pleasers. You know, the people who will do anything for their spouse, whether it's picking up the milk on the way home or climbing Mount Everest. While many people don't like bullies, people pleasers are really the ones who break up marriages. Is your eagerness to please splitting your marriage apart?

Dr. Julia Messer is a former high school English teacher turned psychologist. She got her PhD in clinical psychology from West Virginia University. She's going to talk to us about this people pleasing thing, and we're going to figure out if being Mr. Nice Guy is really a good thing or maybe, a bad thing. Julia, I'm so glad you could join us. Welcome to the show.

Julia: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Lee: I get the impression from the introduction that you're going to tell us to stop being so nice to our spouses, to stop being a people pleaser. And I'm going to tell you, I like you already. Am I on the right track with that?

Julia: Well, not exactly. I'm not saying what we're talking about here is not qualities of a nice person, such as being considerate, giving and kind. What we're talking about here is more of the person who is a pushover, as you were describing. That is, I guess, reinforcing behavior that really isn't helpful or kind. So not qualities of a nice person in general, but really the person who's not communicating at all how they feel and being a pushover or a doormat.

Lee: OK. So, and it is sort of backwards, I think, from what a lot of us might have thought. How is it that the people pleasers are the key to this problem and not the demanding other spouse, maybe, the bully in the relationship?

Julia: Well, I think that they're at least an equal part of the problem because, as I said earlier, they are reinforcing the aggressive behavior. It does allow the person who's being the bully to continue to do so without any kind of consequence or any, sometimes even any awareness that what they're doing is not acceptable to the other person.

Lee: When you dig into the people pleaser, when you look at the personality of that person, what is it about them that makes them so eager to please and to serve their spouse or others?

Julia: Well, it certainly could be part of a personality type or a general temperament. But what we know about communication styles is that they are often learned and modeled from a very early age within a family structure. So, if you think about how you communicate, typically there is someone in your family who is similar to your communication style. And in your family structure, that style is probably useful and adaptive. But it becomes problematic when you get older and you're in your own family and it may not work for you anymore.

Lee: OK. That makes a lot of sense. Now, when I think of sort of the stereotypical American family, you know, if you go back to, like, the Happy Days TV show of the '50s, that kind of thing, I think of the mom as being the people pleaser, the one that will do anything for anybody in the family. Is it mostly women that play that role? Or do you see men doing it, too?

Julia: Well, I think we see men as well in the position of feeling like they can't express how they are actually feeling. And then you do have the situations where the wife in the family is the one who is in kind of a power position in terms of her career, and maybe, the husband is staying at home. You know, the roles are a lot more flexible now than they were. So I think that the issue is with either gender.

Lee: Right. Right. Do you find that people are paired? That there's almost like a magnetic attraction where you have the people pleaser being paired up with the person who's willing to ask for everything?

Julia: That is quite common. I think you're right that there is a draw to that. Again, it could be because of the way that the family structure was when they were growing up. But then again, you sometimes do see people who are paired up, you know two aggressive people, for example. And that's the couple that's constantly fighting, having major blowouts, and then you sometimes even see two very passive people pleasers together that are quite distant from each other and never talk about anything. So, that's out there as well.

Lee: That's interesting. So do you find that, let's say, that you marry a people pleaser and you didn't really know that was what you were getting into. I mean, you weren't really understanding or thinking about these issues back then. Do you find that people sort of adjust their behavior? Do you have people that say, "Hey, I'm married to a people pleaser. I guess I need to be more demanding." Do people shift once they fall into a relationship with one of these types?

Julia: I think that certainly that can happen and that patterns can develop on their own like that based on someone's individual style. But I think more often the couple is that way before they get married, that there is some sense of the dynamic of how the communication is occurring, typically.

Lee: Right. Right. So when this is, I mean obviously you're not dealing with people if this relationship style is working, this communication style is functional. I mean, they're not coming to you and saying, "Boy, we're happy. We just wanted to chat." I mean, they're coming to you because things are not going the way that they would like them to. What sort of problems do you see coming out of this kind of match?

Julia: Well, there can be different types of problems. But one possibility is that the couple really does grow apart because they're not communicating how they feel and one or both of them feel very distant. That there's kind of a coldness to the relationship and they aren't able to have as much fun together as they used to and there's problems in all other areas. The other side to this is that individuals themselves, when you swallow anger and you avoid or ignore how you feel, after so long you can have great contempt so that there is an underlying, subtle anger within all interactions with each other. Or the person can try to distract themselves from the feelings that they're trying to avoid and can get into problems with addictions and escape tactics, diving into Internet issues and just doing what they can to not have to deal with the feelings that they're not facing.

Lee: Right, right. Does the spouse who is being demanding, do they realize at all, do you think that there's any way that they would know that that anger and that resentment is building? Are those things

you mention like the Internet, are those the clues that you would see? And I want to know if that's happening and what would I need to look for?

Julia: Well, I think that certainly if you feel that there's a growing distance and that you're not engaging in activities with your spouse like you used to and that one spouse may be spending all of their free time alone or not wanting to spend time with you, that there may be something that's underlying, the distance. Also, I think any type of sexual issues that are going on could be because of emotions that are not being expressed. And I think that often, the more demanding spouse may sense, just behaviorally, that something's not right. We can call it that there's passive aggressiveness going on with the other spouse, but basically there are behaviors that seem to indicate this person might be angry or unhappy or even sad. Depression and sadness can be another way that is creeping in to the relationship.

Lee: Right, right. So the people pleaser person, that's a tough one to say, is pretty unlikely, I guess, to let that resentment come out in a real... I mean they don't often just say it huh?

Julia: Not often because part of being a people pleaser is to avoid conflict. Because that can mean that you're part of the problem. And people pleasers don't want to be seen as part of the problem. Rather than, I guess, recognizing that it's helpful sometimes to have constructive or good arguing is what we call it, that both people sharing how they feel in a respectful way is, can bring a couple closer together. Not further apart. But people pleasers don't view conflict or don't view disagreement in that way.

Lee: Do you find the people pleaser to be, I mean when they're getting upset, when they're not happy and they feel like they're being taken advantage of and all of that, it obviously they're not saying much of anything to the spouse because as you indicated, that's really just not part of who they are, but are there other things? Are they talking to friends? Are they letting this out in other ways, in other relationships within their lives?

Julia: It could be the type of situation where they feel more comfortable sharing those feelings with friends or family members even. And then that can bring on a whole host of problems because when you start complaining to your family or to your friends, and then those relationships with your spouse do suffer for that. And again, they can do things, maybe, not saying anything to anyone but engaging in kind of unhealthy coping. Even substance abuse or drinking a lot are kind of drowning or swallowing those feelings in other ways that don't involve other people but just continue to hurt themselves.

Lee: Right. So in your experience, when you have one of these couples that are exhibiting this behavior and they do show up in your office, I'm assuming somebody's not happy. So, they've made this appointment. At least, one of them is in there seeing you. What are you finding is happening to these couples? What is becoming of them? Is this sort of the death knell for the marriage?

Julia: I don't think so, no. I think that communication skills can be learned because bad communication can be unlearned just as it was learned initially to begin with. So teaching couples and even individuals, I primarily see individuals and teaching someone to identify and recognize their feelings is an important first step. Because people pleasers may not even be aware of how angry they are because they just aren't acknowledging that emotion is there. I think individually, becoming more in tune with how you feel is important. And then as a couple, learning to listen to each other rather than speaking with, listening to someone with a conversation running in your head about what you're going to say next. Acknowledging how the other person feels without judging them. Non-verbally communicating with good eye contact and full attention. Those things can be taught, and they can certainly improve how a couple interacts with each other. And it can definitely change harmful patterns.

Lee: I would think that even beyond the communication, in one of these relationships, when you start making changes it's got to sort of screw up a lot of the family systems and routines. Like if it's the mom and she's just taken on all of the household responsibilities, all of the kids stuff and is filling these roles for the husband and gosh, when you get involved, you must really upset the system. If they're going to change this, very practical issues are coming up, I would think.

Julia: Yes, I don't think it would be an easy change. But I think that a couple could also, when these changes start occurring, develop a sense of closeness and kind of teamwork, and it can actually be naturally reinforcing to make the changes. And they're certainly not easy to make but then when the couple and the family sees improvement in how everyone is feeling and just the general sense of happiness. As that increases, there can be a lot of warmth that comes from being able to talk about how you feel and a sense of closeness that wasn't there before. When that is added into the family structure, the changes tend to be less bothersome because there's a huge benefit to doing things differently.

Lee: Right, right. So if you were talking to the spouse that, not the people pleaser so much, and I'm going to ask you that in a minute, but if you're talking to the spouse that really is sort of taking advantage of the situation, consciously, unconsciously has really been relying on the people pleaser to just keep doing that stuff, what do you have to say to that person? What's your message to them?

Julia: You know, I think that overall, that person needs to be aware of how they're speaking and how they are a part of the problem as well because I think that's what I would say to both parties is that you have to be aware of your part in the marriage. That it is a group, that it is a dynamic between two people and within a family, you know maybe more than two people. And that the way that things are going, as you said, we're talking about when it becomes very problematic, as the way things are going it's not working for the family. This particular person, as the demanding person, has things to work on just as the people pleaser does.

Lee: Right, right. That's good advice. Yeah. And I think the demanding person, a lot of them, would be able to hear what you're saying and be able to take action on it because they want their marriage to work as much as anybody. Now if you're on the other side of that, flip that coin and you're talking to the people pleaser, I think you've given a lot of good advice for that person today. But what other messages do you want them to hear? They don't want to do this anymore. They want to make the change. What do you advise them?

Julia: Well, I think that first and foremost, none of this is typically done with a bad intention. So, it really is about not judging anyone for their particular style or communication issues. It's more about how can you learn to best and most effectively communicate within your family structure. And also give yourself some kind of empowerment to be able to acknowledge how you feel and then there's a lot of freedom, emotional freedom, and it feels good when you feel as if your opinions count. Your feelings count. You feel comfortable expressing them in a respectful, kind way with your spouse so that everyone benefits from it. You, as an individual, the couple, the family, and that's a real sense of freedom and it can really help people with not just anger but with, as I said, sadness and depression and even anxiety.

Lee: You talk about this issue with a lot of passion. It sounds like it really helps, it excites you. It does something for you to help these folks get out of this situation and make it better. What's that all about?

Julia: Well, I think it's just in general the reason that I'm in this field. I think that, I believe that people can learn certain skills and also certain ways to handle emotions specifically that can really improve their lives. That's kind of why I do what I do because I think it's such a possibility.

Lee: Right. That's a perfect note to end on. Julia, thank you so much for talking with us and for being on the show today.

Julia: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Lee: To find out more about Dr. Julia Messer, visit the website at orensteinsolutions.com. I'm going to put a link to orensteinsolutions.com in the show notes so you can just click on it there. Thank you so much for listening in today. I really appreciate you being with us. If you have feedback about this episode or any of our shows, we'd love to hear from you. You can reach us at our comment line at 919-256-3083 or you can email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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